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County delegation approves budget

Final number shows decrease in pay raises

By **MATTHEW REID**
Staff Reporter

NEWPORT — The Sullivan County delegation narrowly approved an operating budget for the county for the 2008 Fiscal Year, after receiving a budget proposal from the group's executive finance committee last Friday.

By a vote of seven in favor and six opposed, the delegation voted to use the EFC's budget of

\$27,330,610, which was agreed upon by the EFC earlier in the day. The figure was \$299,047 less than the budget recommended by the county commissioners that was subsequently rejected by the delegation.

According to EFC Chairman Brenda Ferland, I-Charlestown, one of the major reductions in the group's budget is from lowering county-wide salary increases to 3 percent. When asked, Ferland stated there is no money set aside in the budget to increase the figure in the future.

Rep. John Cloutier, D-

Claremont, vice chairman of the EFC, said salary increases should be viewed as a positive step for the county.

"Not everyone is getting pay raises of any kind this year," Cloutier said. "Just ask the teachers in the Claremont School District. We're still giving 3 percent raises and I think the most important thing is that we get a budget in place, even if it's not perfect."

Ferland said she was one of two EFC members (the other being Larry Converse, D-Claremont) to

SEE BUDGET PAGE A7

reject the budget total at the group's Friday morning meeting. She said it would be better for the delegation to approve the commissioners' \$27.6 million budget, primarily due to the reduction in salary increases.

Rep. Tom Donovan, D-Claremont, disagreed, saying doing that would minimize the EFC's responsibilities.

"It is our job to look at the budget and make a recommendation," he said. "If we're just going to go with the commissioners' recommendation then why bother even having an executive finance committee?"

Ferland was asked by Rep. Matthew Houde, D-Plainfield, if there were any areas of consensus among EFC members during the budget process, to which she replied, "We could work on this budget for eight years and there still wouldn't be an overall consensus."

Other major differences between the commissioners budget and that of the EFC were cutting county grants by \$90,000 and cutting funding for recreational activities.

After more than an hour and a half of discussion, Cloutier made a motion to accept the EFC's proposed budget, but discussion continued on for another hour.

Rep. Beverly Rodeschin, R-Newport, asked delegation Chairman Peter Franklin, D-Newport, if members of the public would be allowed to speak at the meeting, but Franklin said they could not.

"Members of the delegation can ask direct questions to specific members of the public, but I won't recognize a member of the public who wants to speak," Franklin said. "This is not a public hearing. We've had meetings where the public could speak and this is not one of them. The only reason we're here is to discuss the budget as a committee, and people from the public can wave their hands all they want."

Rodeschin then asked to move the question, which would have resulted in an immediate vote without further discussion, but Franklin chose to refuse the request.

"I am not recognizing that motion, so long as there are delegation members wishing to discuss the matter," Franklin said.

Rodeschin challenged Franklin's decision, but the challenge was defeated by a vote of 10-3.

Franklin was the last member of the delegation to speak in regard to the EFC's budget, saying it should not be accepted.

"The finance committee was given an arbitrary deadline to prepare this budget, but we still have six or seven weeks to straighten out the problems with the current proposals," he said.

Following the vote, Franklin stated he would be resigning as chairman of the delegation effective at the next delegation meeting. Franklin said the next meeting would take place "a few weeks" following the convention, but no specific date was voted on.

The main problem with both the commissioners' budget and the EFC's budget, according to Franklin, is that neither addresses the \$2.5 million the county still has in outstanding debt.

"There is no effort being made to take any fiscal responsibility for the county," Franklin said. "The EFC, the commissioners, the county manager ... no one is willing to face up to the problem."

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D-Newport, delegation chairman

Donovan asked County

Manager Ed Gil de Rubio if a plan is in place to repay the \$2.5 million the county has borrowed and still has outstanding, either in this year's budget or in previous budgets.

Gil de Rubio stated there is no such provision in the current budget, but that a lot is still up in the air in terms of revenue and expenditures.

Ferland said she tried several times to address the issue at EFC meetings, but got no response from the committee, to which Franklin said, "That's exactly what I mean; everyone knows there is a problem, but no one will deal with it."

The EFC budget was approved by Cloutier; Converse; Donovan; Raymond Gagnon, D-Claremont; Ellen Nielsen, D-Claremont; Sue Gottling, D-Sunapee and Arthur Jillette, D-Goshen. Voting against the budget were Franklin; Ferland; Rodeschin; Houde; Carla Skinder, D-Cornish; and James Phinizy, D-Acworth.